

REASON EIGHT

Exploring Utah's Jaw-Dropping Natural Splendor: The Snow's Phenomenal, but that's Just the Beginning

By Jane Gendron



Ron Brown

UTAH LIFE ELEVATED

Utah has long been known as an exceptional snow sports haven—a reputation confirmed by 17 days of basking in the international spotlight of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. Yet, the state touted as “Life Elevated” by the Office of Tourism, offers more than action at altitude.

From the red rocks of Arches National Park to the snowy peaks of the Wasatch Mountains, Utah's natural playground appeals to the hiker and snowboarder alike. It's an outdoor enthusiast's Mecca, where one does not have to choose between fresh powder and an afternoon tee time. In Utah, it is possible to golf and ski in the same day or climb, paddle, hike, bike, fish, horseback ride or motor across a vast and varied landscape.

LIKE WHITE GOLD

As everyone from Stein Eriksen to Ted Ligety knows, Utah's mountains, preferably topped off with fresh snow, are a treasured part of that landscape. Known for extraordinarily dry, feather-weight powder, the resorts consistently rank among the best in the nation. Readers of SKI voted seven of Utah's resorts into the magazine's Top 30 ranking, while Skiing magazine placed four resorts in their Top 25. Snow sports publications have touted everything from terrain parks at Brighton and Park City Mountain Resort to service and cuisine at Deer Valley and Snowbasin. And skiers and riders have followed the good press with Ski Utah announcing a record-breaking 4 million skier-days last season. Similarly, world-class competitions like the U.S. Freeskiing Nationals, the 2007 Chevrolet Freestyle World Cup and the World Superpipe Championships have found their way to the Beehive State.

So, what sets Utah apart from the likes of Austria and Aspen?

“It really comes down to two things: our snowfall and access to our international airport,” explains Nathan Rafferty, president of Ski Utah. Rafferty ranks Utah's top three distinguishing features in the following order: snow, accessibility and variety.

Aside from being “light and fluffy” and, therefore, forgiving, Utah's snow is consistent, says Rafferty. With an average annual snowfall of 500 inches, skiers, snowboarders and folks setting off into wilderness atop snowshoes or snowmobiles can depend on an adequate base of white stuff.

Unlike isolated mountain retreats, Utah's peaks are within a stone's throw of Salt Lake City. “We have 11 ski areas within an hour of our airport,” he says, noting that Snowbird is a mere 29 miles from Salt Lake International Airport. “It should be called Snowbird International Airport,” he quips.

JAW-DROPPING BEAUTY

For adventurers who would rather swap out the skis for hiking boots or perhaps a saddle and chaps, “jaw-dropping beauty,” as Ron Terry of the National Park Service puts it, draws millions of visitors from around the world each year.

“Utah offers some of nature's most rugged landscape, beautiful

wilderness and most whimsical creations,” says Kurt Repanshek, who has covered public land issues since 1980 and authored three guidebooks on national parks (the most recent of which is “National Parks With Kids”). In addition to state lands set aside as wilderness, the five national parks—Zion, Bryce Canyon, Arches, Canyonlands and Capitol Reef—each contain a unique experience of geological and natural wonder.

“[Zion National Park] is a place where you can see, very easily, the process of geology still at work—the erosion and canyon cutting processes,” explains Terry, chief of interpretation and visitor services at the park. The park also boasts anthropological history with 6,000 years of human occupation, from the archaic, ancestral Puebloans to today's visitors flocking from western Europe, Japan and Russia. Home to 120 miles of trails, it is a hiker's paradise.

“I would say that Zion National Park is one of the most spectacular places in the world in terms of scenery. With towering sandstone cliffs

rising over 2,000 feet above Zion Canyon it is a maze of deep narrow canyons," says Terry, who has worked at 12 of the nation's parks. He adds that Zion is home to more than 900 species of plant-life, thanks to the park's varied elevations.

NOT-SO-HIDDEN GEMS

For those who like to pedal, Zion is one of several spots where cyclists can get those muscles burning in an up-canyon ride. Throughout Utah, varied trails and even a bit of asphalt challenge the avid and recreational cyclist alike. Mountain biking options range from Moab's famous Slickrock trail to lift-served summertime adventures at a number of Northern Utah ski resorts. The state also hosts an array of bike-centered events such as NORBA (National Off-Road Bicycle Association) competitions at Deer Valley and the Cactus Huggers Cycling Festival in St. George.

Repanshek, who keeps the public abreast of national park issues on his blog (www.nationalparkstraveler.com), suggests an assortment of must-see attractions, starting with

Moab. "I think you have to spend a day in Arches," he says of the park that boasts more than 2,000 natural sandstone arches. His recommendations span the state, ranging from Zion's Riverside Walk at the Temple of Sinawava, to the lava tubes at Mammoth Cave in Dixie National Forest to extinct volcanoes at Snow Canyon State Park to the Valley of the Gods to Northern Utah's Logan Canyon. The list of hidden and not-so-hidden gems is endless.

In addition to exploring canyons, arches and hoodoos (weird and remarkable formations found at Bryce Canyon), the ancient "human imprint" evident in Utah's wilderness sets the state apart in Repanshek's eyes.

"These parks not only challenge you recreationally, but they challenge you to think about humankind and how far we've come," he says. Like the world-class ski resorts, every type of recreational opportunity is within easy reach. "It's right there in your face. You don't have to drive a half day or fly a half day to get there," he says.

TEMPLE OF SINAWAVA



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NATURE AUTHOR

Though Utah is perhaps lesser known for its water, alpine streams and rivers like the Provo are favored and often secret spots for discerning fly fishermen. Even celebrities like Tiger Woods have made their way to Utah for a bit of tranquil fishing. Whitewater rafting along the Green River is also a popular summertime activity while larger bodies of water, such as Lake Powell and Flaming Gorge, tend to draw the boating crowd.

"God bless our John Wayne westerns," says Leigh Von der Esch,

UTAH
LIFE ELEVATED



DEER VALLEY RESORT

Tourism by the Numbers:

5.2 million recreation visits were made to Utah's five national parks during 2006

Another **4.7 million** recreation visits occurred at Utah's seven national monuments, two national recreation areas, and one national historic site

4.5 million visitors enjoyed Utah's 42 state parks during 2006

23.0 million vehicles crossed Utah's borders along Interstate highways in 2006

21.6 million passengers arrived at Salt Lake International Airport during the year

Utah's ski and snowboard industry notched its fourth consecutive record-breaking season with its 13 ski resorts hosting nearly **4.1 million** skier days during the 2006/07 season

581,154 visitors stopped at one of Utah's six Welcome Centers during 2006

68.3% statewide hotel/motel occupancy rate in 2006, compared to 65.0% in 2005



director of Utah's Office of Tourism, who partially credits the films with drawing international visitors to Utah parks. For those inspired by the cowboy image, there is no shortage of opportunities to saddle up and ride through the state's canyons, meadows and alpine valleys. Whether teetering on the edge of Bryce Canyon's stunning trails or galloping through Butch Cassidy's old stomping grounds, the equestrian set has plenty of room to roam.

SOFT ADVENTURE?

Natural playground aside, Utah is also home to man-made facilities that cater to more traditional athletics. Given the legacy of the 2002 Games, thrill-seekers can test their skills in unique sports including bobsled, skeleton, freestyle aerials and Nordic jumping. Park City's Utah Olympic Park, for example, offers lessons for novices who wish to emulate the high-flying aerialist antics of the athletes who use the site as a training facility.

If white-knuckle luge running is not your idea of an active morning, an emerging new outdoor sports trend might be right in the sweet spot. According to Jeff Harding, who handles sports and events marketing for St. George Convention and Visitors Bureau, "soft adventure" is on the rise. He describes this genre of recreation as having an element of risk, but also an element of control. Joining traditionally popular sports such as hiking and mountain biking,

this slightly more "extreme" recreation type ranges from tandem sky diving to rappelling in slot canyons.

Harding put the diversity of less conventional activities to the test with a visiting film crew. "We had them on ATVs, Segways (a funky new transporter), powered-parachutes and a zip line all within eight hours," he says, admitting that he would normally recommend sampling each activity at a leisurely pace, when possible.

Utah's "incomparable recreational product," is matched by unparalleled amenities, according to Von der Esch. "There's a five-star experience waiting for you in many parts of the state" she says, pointing to luxury havens like Stein Eriksen Lodge and Sowela River Ranch. Harding similarly notes, "Utah still has a rural feel, but you have every big city amenity that the city traveler-adventurer could ask for." With pampering at their fingertips, weekend warriors and travelers can soak in the scenery, accomplish an exhilarating work-out and sit down to an elegant fine dining experience all in the same day.

Perhaps true indulgence means skiing in the morning and teeing off in the afternoon—a feat Rafferty has accomplished on more than one spring day. An avid golfer, Von der Esch ranks Utah's courses among the best in the nation, touting the charms of public courses like Soldier Hollow and Wasatch Mountain State Park. She's been similarly impressed by the courses sprouting up in the desert landscape. "The Moab course

with its ribbon of green through red rock—what a contrast," she says. Courses by esteemed designers, such as Jack Nicklaus and Bruce Summerhays, offer challenging golf in myriad settings.

A RESOUNDING YES!

According to Von der Esch, 19 million visitors make their way to the Beehive state each year—a number, she says, that is steadily increasing ahead of the competition. "I think Utah is being discovered."

While locals might prefer to keep Utah's secret to themselves, its discovery is far from spoiling the outdoor experience. For example, despite the increased number of skiers and snowboarders, Rafferty believes that resorts will remain relatively uncrowded (with the caveat that the Saturday after Christmas will likely always involve a few lift lines). "We've got a lot of room to grow," he says.

With careful planning and continue wise management, the vastness of Utah's landscape will continue to provide adventure and solitude to outdoor enthusiasts as they walk, ride and explore Utah at every altitude for centuries to come.

"There's a five-star experience waiting for you in many parts of the state."

Leigh von der Esch

DIRECTOR, UTAH OFFICE OF TOURISM

For more information on outdoor recreation in Utah, check out the following Web sites:

Utah Travel Council Web site: www.utah.com

Ski Utah Web Site: www.skiutah.com

National Parks Service: www.nps.gov